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A pitch-perfect performance

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A PITCH-PERFECT PERFORMANCE

FOR MARY HUFF '99 and the New York City Children's Chorus, the week began with an opportunity to sing with a musical icon on NBC's "Saturday Night Live."

It became a time to help the nation heal from the horror of the shootings in Newtown, Conn., that left 26 children and adults dead.

Huff, the chorus' co-founder and artistic director, received a call from SNL on Monday, December 10, inviting the choir to provide backup for Paul McCartney and his song "Wonderful Christmastime" on the December 15 Christmas show. After taking care of assorted bureaucratic requirements, such as performance permits for the children, the select choir, ranging from fourth-graders to high-schoolers, was ready to rock and roll with the Beatles legend.

"The children were excited about being on 'Saturday Night Live,'" Huff says. "Their parents were excited that they were singing with Paul McCartney."

Following a 45-minute rehearsal on Thursday — after which McCartney dubbed Huff "Choir Bosslady" — everything seemed set for Saturday night.

Until Friday, when the unthinkable happened in Connecticut.

Saturday morning, Huff awoke to a slew of messages from SNL staff. Could the choir sing something that night to honor the victims? What's possible? Perhaps "Silent Night?" Oh, and could they open the show?

"Our Christmas concert was scheduled the next [Sunday] afternoon, so we had rehearsed the hymn," says Huff. And having worked with many of the children for years and prepared them for performances at Carnegie Hall and other major venues, she was confident they could handle the moment.

So at 11:30 p.m. December 15, "Saturday Night Live" opened not with a crazy skit, but with the



The choir with the Beatles legend (top); Huff and her charges with Matt Lauer on "Today."

New York City Children's Chorus' poignant rendition of "Silent Night."

A minute and 35 seconds later, the carol ended and the picture faded to black — only to return seconds later on the choir, which then had the honor of shouting the show's trademark opening line, "Live from New York! It's Saturday Night!" They returned at the close of the show to sing with McCartney. "He was lovely to me and the children," says Huff. "He's a trained choral musician, and he knows his choral music."

Critics praised the chorus and the show for the simple, moving way they acknowledged the Newtown

tragedy. Huff says she received appreciative comments from around the country, thanking the choir for its touching performance — which it reprised on NBC's "Today" program the following Monday morning.

Huff has a long history of working with young people. Holder of a master's degree from Yale University, she was director of the children's and high school choirs at Saint Ignatius Loyola Church in New York from 2004-12, during which time participation quadrupled. She is now associate director of music at Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church, where her husband, Andrew Henderson, is music director and organist.

They launched the New York City Children's Chorus last fall, attracting many of the children Huff had worked with at both churches. "There was no community-based children's chorus in New York steeped in the Western classical music tradition," she says. "There are fantastic children's choirs that have different missions, but nothing like this. Even Greenville has its Chicora Voices."

Interest in the program, which supports seven choirs for children ages 4-18, has jumped since the national television appearances.

Huff sees it as part of the ministry of the church and says, "We've created the kind of choir we wish we could have had as children."

And the kind that brings solace to a country in mourning.

— JIM STEWART

"Angel," a CD of anthems recorded by the Saint Ignatius Children's Choir under Mary Huff's direction, is online at www.msacd.com/catalog/cd/IMS1399. Photos provided by Mary Huff.